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# Teacher perspectives of school-based assessment in a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur

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## Abstract

School-based assessment is a new policy venture in the highly centralised education system of Malaysia. One area that has been subjected to this change initiative is the Oral English Assessment (OEA). A qualitative study was conducted to explore teacher perspectives of the implementation of school-based OEA among the Form 1 (Year 7) students in a secondary school. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on two English Language teachers and their oral English assessment sessions were observed. Data were coded, clustered, and categorized into themes. Analysis indicated that both teachers generally agreed that school-based assessment is the way forward in assessment provided the fundamentals are in place. Issues such as grading guidelines and implementation procedures must be ironed out before successful implementation can happen. Cross-case analysis revealed three major themes: insufficient guidelines on the implementation process, lack of teachers' knowledge base, and lack of external monitoring of school-based OEA. The inherent implication of the themes is that greater attention is required in the implementation of educational policies with effective alignment of the relevant tools.

School-based assessment, teacher competency, policy implementation, Malaysia

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*Keywords:* School-based assessment; teacher competency; policy implementation; Malaysia.

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, Malaysia has practiced a centralised education and assessment system. With regard to assessment, students have been assessed formally through common public examinations that were designed and developed by the examination syndicate of the Ministry of Education. The public examinations included the Primary School Assessment Evaluation in Year 6, Lower Secondary Assessment in Year 9, and Malaysia Certificate of Education in Year 11. In recent years, there has been a shift in assessing certain aspects of students' performance at the individual school level. This change from a public examination-based assessment to school-based assessment (SBA) was introduced for three main reasons. Firstly, the proponents of assessment methods believe that students' ability and knowledge should not be tested merely through a one-off, summative evaluation; instead, it should be carried out constantly throughout the year (Tombari & Borich, 1999). It is also in line with the Malaysian Ministry of

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Education's plan to move away from a heavy examination focused education to a developmental one. Secondly, through SBA the government wishes to promote communication and creative skills among the students. In the long run, it will help develop the competencies of students in higher order thinking skills such as application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Ministry of Education, 2001). Thirdly, social skills that centre on interpersonal relationship and working with others in teams without having to lose individual perspectives are not necessarily assessed by external end-of-year examinations. SBA has the advantage of fairer assessment of the students' social skills and may focus on student-student interaction, student-teacher interaction, and group work models. With a multifaceted observation of the students on a regular basis SBA may be able to obtain a more accurate profile of what students know, understand and can do (Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, 2003).

Countries such as Hong Kong, Australia and England have long included the SBA concept for assessment purposes (Davison, 2004). In Malaysia, the SBA process has been shaping up rather gradually. It started with the introduction of the Oral English and Oral Malay assessment at the school level when the marks were included into the final grades of the public examinations (Ministry of Education, 1991a, 1991b). Presently, the Year 7, 8, and 10 Oral English Assessment (OEA) is carried out twice while the Year 9 and Year 11 OEA is done once a year. The OEA grades are a prerequisite to pass the Malay and English language subjects in the Lower Secondary Assessment and the Malaysia Certificate of Education such as social sciences. For geography and history the students are required to carry out project-based activities that would contribute towards their final grade in the Lower Secondary Assessment in Year 9, and the Malaysia Certificate of Education in Year 11.

The introduction of SBA in Malaysian schools has certainly been gaining momentum. However, its continuous progress will depend on the teachers' conviction and support for it. It is a conventional wisdom that teachers are the most important catalyst for any educational reform. They need to understand and appreciate the wellness of SBA. Hence, this paper seeks to explore the perspective of teachers toward school-based OEA and how they react to challenges in its implementation in their school. The paper commences with an outline of relevant literature and proceeds with a discussion of key points from the interviews of two teachers who have been actively involved in SBA implementation in their schools. Then, it provides a framework that explains the issues related to school-based assessment as perceived and experienced by teachers. The paper concludes with several policy recommendations to address the ineffective implementation processes of school-based assessment.

## **2. School-based Assessment (SBA)**

The term "assessment" in the educational context is used interchangeably with "evaluation", "educational measurement", "testing", and "examination" (Umar, 2005). However, it always concerns information on learning and learning acquisition, which is about whether and what people have learned. The purpose of assessment is constantly changing. Robertson (2005) suggests two 'traditional' reasons for assessment which are mainly for communicating results of student achievement which has been a key responsibility for teachers, and selecting and sorting students for entry into various programmes. Besides reporting and sorting student assessment can improve student learning, teacher effectiveness, and increase the levels of student engagement with the material (Marzano, 2000; McMillan, 2004; Shepard, 2000). Heady (2000) suggests assessment tools should be "able to demonstrate continuous improvement" and help students focus on their own learning while the measurement methods should be consistent, increase student understanding and give them opportunities to learn and reflect on their own learning outcomes.

In addition, the assessment approach which focuses on tracing students' learning progress has become more popular. Freeman and Lewis (1998) stated that the five main purposes of assessment are "to select, to certify, to describe, to aid learning and to improve teaching" which give a balance to public judgment and personal development. Tombari and Borich (1999) believed that the best way to think of assessment is as a process that involves many things done at different time periods, rather than as one thing done at one time. However, Black et al. (2003) noted that assessment methods that carry the purpose of providing certificates are infrequent, isolated from normal teaching and learning and do not effectively promote student learning. On the other hand, Stiggins (2004) pointed out that assessment is the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform instructional decisions. He also specified five quality standards of accurate classroom assessment: serve a specific purpose, arise from clear and appropriate achievement targets, rely on a proper assessment method, sample student achievement appropriately, and eliminate distortion of results due to bias.

Assessment for learning is aimed at improving learning. It is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how

best to get there (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). At the same time, assessment can also act as a gauge to indicate teachers' efficiency and effectiveness. At the classroom level, assessment can serve as a powerful teaching tool and the results can inform a variety of instructional decisions (Stiggins, 2004).

Another important area to consider for a test is its reliability and validity (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006) which include the appropriateness, meaningfulness, correctness, and usefulness of the tests and the consistency of the grading. It is vital that every test designed is valid and reliable. When discussing oral testing, Ur (1997) argues that the criteria implemented may differ from examiner to examiner. This then raises counter issues of consistency and reliability of school-based Oral English Assessment.

SBA can help to increase students' involvement through keeping reading records and journals and participating in group discussions. Teachers could also "encourage learners to monitor improvements in their performance over time through repeated self-assessment" (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). In school-based OEA, students are given feedback on their assessment. Then they are given the chance to redo the assessment until both the teacher and student are satisfied with the grade. Hence, both parties are fully involved in the teaching and learning process through OEA.

Since teachers play a key role in the assessment processes, it is imperative that they are well educated in this area. Their competency and commitment are key ingredients in the success of any assessment endeavours. Studies have indicated that teachers engaged most effectively and performed well in assessment practices when they clearly understood the meaning and the changes that need to be incorporated in the implementation (Torrance, 1995). Although it is an accepted fact that SBA is a powerful instructional avenue, it cannot be achieved until and unless teachers understand the concept of SBA and are equipped with the right knowledge, skills, and attitudes to practice it effectively (Chapman & Snyder, 2000; Stillman, 2001).

In a study conducted on training language teachers for new ways of assessment, Egyud, Gal, and Glover (2001) have stated that language teachers need to be involved during the design and validation of a language examination or other assessment system through an ongoing support system. It can be concluded that for successful implementation of any new assessment system, the implementation should work in tandem with extensive school-based exploration of the problems and possibilities of new approaches to assessment (Torrance, 1995a, p. 56). Teachers should be provided with necessary counselling and guidance in matters related to implementation of the new assessment system (Begum & Farooqui, 2008). And, most importantly, teachers' competency in the new ways of assessment and structural, cultural, emotional support and professional development or training provided for them is going to determine the success or failure of the assessment.

### **3. Method**

This study used qualitative case study method and data were collected mainly through semi-structured, face-to-face open interviews with two selected teachers involved in school-based Oral English Assessment. Interview technique was used as the major data collection tool for it permitted a level of in-depth information gathering, free responses and flexibility that cannot be obtained by other methods and procedures and provides rich data to explain the phenomena under study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Data were also collected through observation of the Oral English Assessment sessions and policy and school documents related to OEA. At the beginning of the data collection stage, a brainstorming session was conducted with colleagues in the teaching profession to come up with interview questions related to the topic concerned. Later the questions were fine-tuned with the help of experts and the interview protocol was developed. The interviews were audio recorded with permission of the respondents and later transcribed for analysis.

Respondents for this study were selected based on the purposeful sampling techniques that allowed selection of individuals and sites that provided maximal variation and better understanding of the central phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2005). For this study, two English teachers involved in the school-based OEA in Form 1 (Year 13) classrooms in a secondary school were selected as respondents. The list of 14 English teachers in the selected secondary school was short-listed to two teachers based on their teaching experience at the lower secondary school, direct involvement for an extended period in the practice of OEA, and willingness to participate in the study. Three research questions were developed to guide the study. They were as follows:

1. What are the teachers' perspectives toward the current school-based Oral English Assessment (OEA)?
2. What are the challenges the teachers face in implementing the school-based OEA assessment process?
3. What are the contextual factors that affect the implementation of school-based OEA in schools?

#### 4. Analysis of Data

The data analysis process started as soon as the interviews, observations, and document perusal were started. The data collection and analysis went on simultaneously helping to build on and strengthen each other. The data from the study were coded into three levels, namely, descriptive, topical and analytic coding that helped to identify emerging themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In the descriptive coding, data were sorted according to the individual teacher's responses to the major research questions and the sub-questions. The coded data were then cross-analysed and re-categorised under topical coding. Finally, the data from the various topics were analysed further, grouped as emergent themes, which eventually provided the answers to the questions under study.

The analysis of data obtained from the interviews, observations, and document analysis revealed three emergent themes. They include (1) insufficient guidelines on the implementation of school-based OEA, (2) poor knowledge-base of teachers on school-based OEA, and (3) lack of external monitoring of school-based OEA.

##### 4.1. *Insufficient guidelines*

Teachers who participated in the study exhibited basic knowledge of school-based OEA. But their knowledge was limited to aspects such as the frequency of assessment, content, objectives, and some ideas of carrying out the OEA activities. They differed in the interpretation of the objectives and how they can be achieved at the school-level. One teacher said, "It is to train students to speak" while the other believed it was to fulfil a requirement in the education curriculum. Such differences in understanding the objectives by teachers could be due to insufficient guidelines provided by the education authorities to prepare them well for the school-based OEA.

Insufficient guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education to teachers make it difficult to implement school-based OEA successfully. Questions such as how OEA was conducted drew negative responses from the respondents. One of the teachers who compared the new school-based OEA with the former oral English assessment done externally by the Ministry of Education stated:

Those days using the old format, we were given the criteria for grading. But in this new form, there aren't clearly stated criteria. Those old forms were better than this new form. We knew the criteria in the old forms in depth. We had the sections on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. But in this new form, we don't have that kind of criteria. We just listen in general and give the mark based on the bands given: Excellent (10-15), good (6-9) and so on.

Another teacher concurred with the earlier teacher's statement by saying that:

School based Oral English Assessment is very subjective. It is subjective because the marks that are being given are left to the discretion of the teacher – human being – without any structured format. So it is very... very subjective.

From the quotes above, it could be deduced that there were no clear guidelines as to how the school-based OEA should be carried out, its objectives or purpose, grading standards, and so forth. Both respondents agreed that there was a place for school-based assessment in schools. Nevertheless, the process of implementation needed to be improved especially in terms of guidelines on grading format or scheme, clearly stated criteria, and allocation of marks for various components to tackle the subjective nature of the assessment.

Interview and observation data also indicated that both respondents interpreted the guidelines differently by using different procedures while conducting school-based OEA. While one teacher took a double period lesson to brief the students on school-based OEA, the other teacher did not have any briefing session at all. One of the teachers also lamented whether all the other teachers conducting school-based OEA were doing as what she did for pre-oral preparation, the assessment process, and the grading. She was under the impression that most Form 1 English teachers would likely to assess students according to their own interpretation and discretion.

Since the teachers failed to get proper guidelines on the OEA implementation, they implemented it the way they thought best. They graded students based on their past experiences and the old format of oral English assessment provided under the centralised system. The difference in implementation could affect consistency in the grading of student performance, thus having a direct implication on the validity and reliability of the assessment. More standardisation was needed in this aspect to ensure more effective and efficient school based OEA.

#### 4.2. *Poor knowledge-base of teachers*

Teachers' knowledge base of school-based assessment encompassed their understanding of its aims and philosophy, principles of assessment and evaluation, and language of the media of assessment. To start with, both teachers who participated in the study did not show much understanding about the aims and the philosophical underpinnings of the school-based OEA as envisaged by the Ministry of Education. One teacher believed that the aim of the OEA was to test the ability of students to speak in English and the other thought that it was done merely to fulfil a requirement of the national curriculum.

Secondly, it was vital that teachers not only understood the purpose of formative assessment but its effective implementation processes as well (Baron & Boschee, 1995; Ministry of Education, 2001). According to Weir (1993), formative assessment was not generally understood by many teachers, and they were weak in practice. As a respondent said:

We are not sure about the assessment methods. We are not given formal training to conduct school-based OEA. I suggest that it would be good if we are exposed to one training programme that teaches us to conduct it properly. How to assess students' oral English performance?

Teachers had to be cognizant of formative evaluation and its role in student learning. They should possess the necessary competencies to put formative assessment into practice. Both respondent teachers were unclear about the concept of formative evaluation and thus were unable to conduct the school-based OEA effectively.

From the interview with both respondents, it could be concluded that assessment literacy was lacking among teachers with regard to oral English assessment and they needed some exposure or training. As one of the teachers mentioned:

That is why it's so difficult to assess. You don't have any firm criteria. We tend to give marks based on our impression of the student. So I feel that we have to learn, if possible, attend a course that will teach us how to assess students so that it will be more uniform, especially in the allocation of marks.

This statement clearly pointed out the need for professional development for the teachers to understand the concept and improve their practice of school-based OEA.

Thirdly, teachers' linguistic knowledge, in this case English language competency was also important to the overall success of the school-based OEA. As assessors, teachers needed thorough knowledge in English language and its grammatical components before they could assess the students objectively, thus increasing the validity and reliability of the assessment (Stiggins, 2004).

#### 4.3. *Lack of external monitoring*

Lack of external monitoring was also a contributing factor in the poor implementation of the school-based OEA. External monitoring referred to an outside auditing agency that observed the OEA process conducted at the school level and gave direct comments and feedback to the teachers involved in the process. This was done mainly to ensure that grades given to each student were valid and reliable. In the research site, both teachers disclosed that there were no external assessors to validate the students' grades and the teachers' grading standards. For instance, one teacher adopted the individual work model for Form 1 whereas the other teacher used group work model to assess student performance. However, group work model was stipulated by the Ministry of Education to be used for Form 3 (Year 9) OEA only. Such discrepancies or problems could be sorted out and solved by having an external assessor to monitor the actual assessment processes at the school level. Talking about lack of monitoring, one teacher mentioned:

No, I don't know if I am doing the right thing but I feel I do. And I always consult my colleague to see if I am on the right track. I want to be right, although no one checks my method of conducting OEA.

Different teachers conducted school-based OEA differently because they lacked external monitoring and validation by an assessor to triangulate and verify students' grading. As one of the teachers said:



But we assess specifically for grammar or the language but overall. I listen to student and generally assess their ability to speak. Based on my judgement, I give grading as either 'good', 'satisfactory', or 'not satisfactory.'

In the case of two teachers who were observed, there was a vast difference in how they were conducting the school-based OEA. One followed the individual assessment model prescribed by the Ministry of Education whereas the other used group work as an avenue for OEA as she believed the group to be a natural setting to get students talking. This teacher explained, "When I form groups I inform ahead that each student would get marked according to his or her participation." The two teachers provided further evidence that OEA was practiced randomly in the schools.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

From the analysis of data obtained from the interviews with teachers, observations and perusal of various documents, it was possible to deduce that school-based OEA was not conducted efficiently in the school under study. There seemed to be a confusion and high degree of variability in the conduct of the OEA by the two teachers. Their practice was not uniform and did not follow any particular standards. It could be a hurdle to achieving school-based OEA as envisaged by the government.

Since Malaysian teachers had been exposed to the usual summative testing by the central examination syndicate of the Ministry of Education for a long time, the introduction of the school-based OEA was something new. In order to effectively practice this new formative assessment, they would need proper guidelines on the objectives, frameworks, and the implementation of OEA at the school level. Clear sense of direction, purpose, proper task design, scoring methods, freedom from bias, and effective use of assessment would enable teachers to carry out efficient and effective school-based OEA (Stiggins, 2004). Clear guidelines would also bring about a certain degree of uniformity and standardization in the practice of OEA.

Developing teachers' knowledge base on formative assessment and linguistic literacy appeared to be another important task of the Ministry of Education. Focused, intentional, and collaborative discussions among the Form 1 English language teachers, preferably facilitated by the school's Head of Language Department and/or the English Head of Panel could help teachers improve their knowledge on formative assessment and linguistic literacy capabilities. Collaborative and engaging discussions of the school-based OEA practices and implementation strategies should be carried out on a regular basis to enable teachers to focus on the objectives when conducting school-based OEA.

Monitoring of teachers' OEA practices was another important aspect. Ideally, the external assessor could be the school's head of Language Department and/or head of English subject panel who could suggest the necessary changes and rectify problems arising from their observations. The collaborative effort of the heads of departments and the English language panel heads might improve the implementation process, thereby improving the school-based assessment processes. In certain cases, members of the district education office or the state education department could also make school visits to help and supervise teachers with the OEA. Developmental supervision provided could raise the confidence level and competency of teachers in organizing and conducting school-based OEA.

Finally, teachers provided with well designed professional development programs could make tremendous impact on the successful implementation of school-based OEA. As Ramsey argued (2005), the emphasis on developing teachers' skills in assessment methods and procedures could bring about positive results with regard to the implementation of school-based OEA. More effective and frequent in-house training will give teachers a better grasp of the content as well as the method of carrying out OEA in schools.

## 6. Conclusion

School-based assessment is a new venture in the Malaysian school system. Unfortunately, insufficient guidelines for teachers on the implementation of the school-based assessment, poor knowledge-base of teachers, and lack of proper external monitoring caused hurdles in successful implementation of school-based assessment. Through well designed professional development teachers could be helped to become more school-based assessment literate and feel a stronger sense of efficacy and ownership for the new modes of assessment. In addition, the Ministry of Education would also need to focus on the selection, recruitment and the professional development of teacher

candidates who would be involved in the school-based OEA in the future. Coupled with proper policy implementation strategies, the new school-based assessment initiative could become a success story in Malaysia.

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